Since its inception in 1997, the SBL Seminar on Theological Perspectives on the Book of Ezekiel has provided an opportunity for a number of scholars to explore new and varied approaches to research on Ezekiel. This volume includes the contributions of many of the seminar’s participants, and offers a range of thoughtful and intriguing contributions to the field of Ezekiel study.

The volume opens with Ralph Klein’s introduction, which provides a fine summary of both the methods and contents of the other essays in the volume, as well as their place in the context of earlier Ezekiel research and the current state of study. The other essays, as the subtitle indicates, are grouped according to their treatment of theological and anthropological themes.

Daniel Block’s essay offers a good survey of literature from Mesopotamian sources on the abandonment of cities by their deities, ranging from Sumerian laments and the Tikulti-Ninurta epic to later Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian texts. His research shows clearly that Mesopotamian culture exhibited an ideology of divine abandonment of cities and lands, usually caused by cultic and moral offenses. He reads Ezekiel 8-11 as a “divine departure narrative,” and traces nuanced differences between Ezekiel and extra-biblical materials.

Baruch Schwartz provides perhaps the strongest and most provocative essay in the volume, “Ezekiel’s Dim View of Israel’s Restoration.” After noting that Ezekiel’s call
and commission mention only doom, while much of the later sections of the book speak of restoration, Schwartz examines the vocabulary of Ezekiel and its contrasts with ideological features of Jeremiah. Avoiding projection of later Christian notions of grace, love, and redemption onto Ezekiel, he concludes that repatriation, renewal, and restoration promised in the book have nothing to do with divine love or grace. Instead, they are the result of YHWH’s “ego-centric” desire to be known among the nations, and to re-program Israel so that its proper worship will glorify him. Quoting Moshe Greenberg, he sees the relationship between YHWH and Israel as “loveless and necessary.”

John T. Strong, one of the editors of the volume, reviews previous scholarship on the traditions surrounding Zion and the divine קָבֹד in his essay, “God’s Kabôd: The Presence of Yahweh in the Book of Ezekiel.” Viewing Ezekiel as a theological conservative, wishing to maintain aspects of the promise of divine presence for the elect of the exilic community, Strong concludes that the divine קָבֹד was never “de-throned” when it departed from Jerusalem as described in Ezekiel 8-11, but rather went forth to do battle for YHWH against Chaos and return victorious at the close of the book. His argument depends on reading parallels between Ezekiel and the Baal cycle from Ugarit, and here he is less than fully convincing, since the text of Ezekiel itself never mentions that God’s קָבֹד “does battle” against any force.

Steven Tuell sets out to discover where God’s presence does reside for the exilic community once the קָבֹד departs from Jerusalem in his essay, “Divine Presence and Absence in Ezekiel’s Prophecy.” He provides a good comparison of notions of divine presence in both Ezekiel and “P” texts, and concludes that Ezekiel’s conception of divine absence is a reaction against corrupt cultic and royal institutions. After examining the key text of Ezekiel 11:16, where YHWH promises to be יְהוָה הַקָּבֹד, “like a small sanctuary” for the exilic community, Tuell concludes that the text of Ezekiel’s book itself will be a kind of “verbal icon,” mediating the divine presence for the exiles in Babylon. Though this is a provocative suggestion, buttressed by comparisons with Christian iconographic traditions, the importance of textuality in the sign-act of Ezekiel’s eating of the scroll (Ezek 3:1-3), and links between Ezekiel and later texts from Qumran and rabbinic times, there is still no direct evidence that Ezekiel’s book, in particular, functioned in worship or other settings to “mediate divine presence” for Ezekiel’s exilic audience. His arguments, however, are well constructed and suggestive.

John Kutsko’s essay, “Ezekiel’s Anthropology and its Ethical Implications,” makes a case for linking Ezekiel’s understanding of the relationship between the divine and the human to Priestly notions of humans being created in the divine image. His strongest arguments relate to the use of הַמָּנוּס in both Ezekiel 1:26 and Gen. 1:26, Ezekiel’s refusal to use the term בְּיַד אֹיְבֵי for “other gods” and his implicit critique of Mesopotamian cult.
Jacqueline Lapsley provides an excellent discussion of contemporary discussions of shame, both by biblical scholars and others, in her essay “Shame and Self-Knowledge.” Using Carl Schneider’s distinction between discretion-shame (akin to modesty, which prevents certain behavior) and disgrace-shame (which creates sanctions, and a “break between the self and others,” after performing “shameful” behaviors), Lapsley convincingly shows that, throughout his book, Ezekiel views shame as memory and self-loathing, and that it will only come for Israel as a result of YHWH’s saving and restorative actions. For Ezekiel, Lapsley notes, human activity is the source of human failure, and human self-knowledge and moral growth can only occur as a result of divine activity.

Dexter Callender examines the difficult text of Ezekiel 28:12, and takes the risky option of basing his reading on a textual emendation of the MT’s תָּמוּנָה, “measurement,” to a reading of “likeness,” מִיסְכָּנִים. Since both the LXX and the Vulgate support his conjecture, his effort is both plausible and fruitful. Callender links materials in Ezek 28’s oracle against Tyre with Gen 1-3 and Job 15:7’s mention of the “first man.” After presenting various uses of “seal” as a designation for a royal office and arguing that Gen 1-3 usage of מִיסְכָּנִים implies an image of the “primal human,” Callender concludes Ezek 28’s description of the King of Tyre as “a seal, a likeness” indicates the prophet’s critique of foreign rulers as executors of YHWH’s will.

Margaret Odell provides an excellent discussion of genre questions in Ezekiel in her essay, “Genre and Persona in Ezekiel 24:15-42.” She begins by arguing that the “persona” of Ezekiel, rather than the notion of “prophetic book,” may not be the key to understanding the Book of Ezekiel as a whole. She then examines Ezek 24 in some detail, and finds that previous readings assuming the passage provides biographical information about the prophet are flawed. She reads the text in conjunction with other texts concerning mourning in the Hebrew Bible, as well as materials on the donning of turbans, and convincingly suggests that the Ezekiel text is not about the suppression of emotion,
but rather about Ezekiel’s being a sign to the exiles of their new identity as God’s elect. She concludes the essay with a fruitful comparison of Ezekiel’s book with the genre of Mesopotamian building texts, particularly Esarhaddon’s Babylonian inscription, suggesting an “intriguing parallel” for further reflection on how attention to genre can affect readings of Ezekiel’s book.

Finally, Corrine Patton offers a response to feminist critiques of metaphors of anti-female violence in Ezek 16 and 23. Her argument is grounded in her concern for keeping Ezekiel as “part of the canon, without stripping it of its “authoritative status.” She claims that, contrary to recent contemporary readings, the metaphors used in these admittedly disturbing chapters are not concerned with allowing husbands to legitimate violent acts against their wives, but were originally intended to produce shock and horror among ancient readers, and to make clear that Judah was to blame for its own demise. Patton’s concern regarding careful attention to the ancient context of biblical writers and readers is well-taken. But her attempt to argue that violent sexual metaphors are used in Ezekiel because Israelite males in the exile had themselves suffered sexual violence lacks solid evidence. In addition, feminist and other critical readings of biblical materials arise precisely because the text continues to have power and authority, both in faith communities and the wider culture, even when its metaphors are difficult or even ethically unacceptable. Readings with which we disagree are not always “misreadings,” but are readings offered with different methodologies and agendas, which we must honor rather than simply dismiss. Taken as a whole, this volume of essays presents excellent work by some of the leading scholars working on Ezekiel today, and will be an excellent resource for all students and teachers of this continually intriguing prophetic book.